

MOVING FORWARD

HOW BEST DO WE INVESTIGATE PARENTAL SUPERVISION OF CHILDREN AT THE BEACH?

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ABSTRACT

Introduction/background

Previous University of Ballarat research identified that parents supervise their children with less vigilance at swimming pools than playgrounds, despite the serious consequences potentially associated with inadequate supervision at pools. The closed environment of public pools and the presence of lifeguards may be influential in lowering parental guard. The proposed research project aims to investigate parental supervision at beaches, specifically related to child injury risk and drowning prevention. The research is still in the design phase and the researchers seek input from water safety experts to assist in project development. This session will be interactive, providing ample opportunity for audience members to contribute to discussion.

Methods

Following a brief outline of our research to date and current plans for further research, the presenters will invite expert comment from conference delegates regarding study design. It is anticipated that the ensuing discussion will be interesting and stimulating.

Discussion

Consequent to this session and the discussion it fosters, the researchers will refine their research plans. The opportunity to receive input from the group of interested and concerned individuals who make up the Water Safety 2008 audience will enhance the proposed research, leading to an improved research project, the findings of which will help water safety stakeholders in targeting their drowning prevention programs.

Conclusion

Expert opinion is a recognised process for research design development. Water Safety 2008 provides an ideal forum to enhance the proposed research through interaction with practitioners. In turn, the findings of this research will provide important information to those actively involved in the fight against drowning.

PRESENTATION PAPER

Introduction

Unintentional injury is the leading cause of death among Australian children aged 1 – 14 years, and drowning is the second greatest cause of injury related death in this age group (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare [AIHW], 2005). The importance of constant supervision for the prevention of childhood drowning, particularly at the beach and in private swimming pools, has been highlighted in many Australian water safety campaigns such as “Play it Safe by the Water” (Department of Justice, 2007), “Keep Watch” (RLSSA, 2005), “Kids Alive Do the Five” (Lawrence, 2006) and “Safe Waters” (Haddrill & Mitchell, 2006). Internationally, Petridou and Klimentopoulou (2006) and Peterson and Stern (1997) have emphasised that parental supervision is vitally important in high risk settings such as aquatic environments, stating that it may be the only effective intervention for injury prevention in such situations. Despite these claims, there is a dearth of literature specifically investigating or evaluating supervision behaviours and practices.

In the paper “How do parents supervise their children at public pools and playgrounds” (Petrass, Blitvich and Finch, 2008) already delivered at this conference, the findings of an investigation of parental/carer supervision behaviours at public swimming pools have been discussed. This study found that parental supervisory practices observed at public pools were less vigilant than those at public playgrounds. While anecdotally it has been suggested that parents may be depending on lifeguard supervision at pools, given the potential consequences of inadequate supervision in an aquatic environment, these findings are indeed alarming.

The authors are interested to investigate whether similar supervisory behaviour patterns occur at beaches, and to explore the supervisor, child and environmental factors that influence the level of supervision that parents provide to their children. A mixed method approach, which incorporates observational research methods and self report, is proposed. Expert opinion is a recognised process for research design development and in order to inform and validate our proposed research methods, we seek consultation with Water Safety 2008 conference

delegates. Your input will allow us to refine our research plan, leading to an improved research project, the findings of which will assist water safety stakeholders in targeting future drowning prevention programs.

The overall aim of the proposed research project is to generate knowledge and understanding of parental beliefs, perceptions and behaviours in relation to the level of risk at beach settings. The following research questions have been posed:

- 1. What are parents’ general beliefs about the level of injury risk associated with beach environments?
- 2. How do parental, child and environmental factors influence parental perceptions of injury risk in beach environments?
- 3. How do parental, child and environmental factors impact on levels of actual and self-reported supervision of children at the beach?

Examples of factors which will be considered are outlined in Table 1.

Table 1: Examples of supervisor, child and environmental factors for consideration

Supervisor, child or environmental factors	How factors will be measured
Gender of supervisor and child	Male/female
Age - Supervisor	16-18; 19-55; 56+
- Child	<1, 1-4, 5-9, 10-14
Location of residence from setting	Near/Far
Frequency of visiting beach setting	More than once a week; weekly; fortnightly; every three weeks; monthly; infrequently (e.g. for a week or fortnight holiday); other
Undertaken swimming lessons	Yes/No
Type of beach	Patrolled/unpatrolled
Location on patrolled beach	Between flags/outside flags
Activity undertaken on beach	Playing on sand; climbing on rocks on sand; in water; exploring rock pools; recreational game e.g. cricket, soccer, volleyball; other

Due to the relative infancy of research investigating the role of supervision in injury prevention, researchers are yet to agree upon a standardised method of investigation. Based on the findings of a systematic review undertaken by the authors of methodological approaches used in investigations of supervision, a mixed method approach incorporating naturalistic observational and self report methods has been selected. A categorisation scheme developed through modification of a taxonomy used by Saluja and colleagues (2004) will provide a framework against which to measure supervision at beaches.

Naturalistic observation involves observing individuals in a natural setting, with minimal intrusion, influence or disturbance on the participant's behaviour throughout the observation process (McBurney & White, 2004). A naturalistic observational technique provides rich information of the overall context in which unintentional injury occurs in natural settings (Harrell, 1994). Further, the described and measured behaviours are likely to reflect the supervisors' true behaviours (Harrell, 1994). Naturalistic observation has been shown to be very accurate for specifically defining the behaviours of the supervisor to be observed, and can be used to develop a way of measuring and quantifying the behaviour (Berg & Latin, 2004). This approach, albeit costly, time consuming and very labour demanding (Morrongiello & House, 2004) maximises ecological validity (Morrongiello, 2005). The proposed study aims to use naturalist observation to inform about parental supervision in beach environments.

Self report through questionnaire is a research method which can provide a broad understanding of factors including opinions; attitudes; behaviours or beliefs; background and demographic information; and knowledge of intentions and aspirations from a large sample (Marczyk et al., 2005). A questionnaire is a versatile and simple tool, with relative low cost for gathering a large amount of data of high enough quality to test hypotheses and make real-world policy suggestions (Breakwell et al., 2006). However, steps must be taken to assure the validity of questionnaires, and consultation with water safety experts at water Safety 2008 will form part of the validation process of the questionnaire to be used in the proposed study.

Participant narrative is an additional method of self-report also planned for implementation in this study. Questionnaire completion will occur at beach settings where the researcher will approach potential participants to invite them to take part. As participants return completed questionnaires, the researcher will ask whether they have any further comments to offer, and these comments will be recorded. Simple narrative such as this can be information rich and add value to the research process.

The use of these methods of data collection provides the opportunity for triangulation – a process which uses different research methods to explore the same phenomenon (Hayes, 2004). This mixed method approach, where comparison and overlap of data is applied to confirm and validate data, is considered to provide more compelling evidence than would be available from studies which implement single method designs (Morrongiello, et al., 2004a; Morrongiello, et al., 2004b).

Conclusion

Water Safety 2008 provides an ideal forum to enhance the proposed research through interaction with water safety practitioners and researchers. The modifications to the research plan that follow this consultation should ensure that the project is designed so that findings will provide important information that can be used by those actively involved in drowning prevention. We thank all session participants in anticipation of their contribution to this forum.

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